

Hiding Til You Came Along

by LJ9

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For Mericcup Week day 4; the title is from the prompt song, "You Found Me" by Kelly Clarkson.

* * *

><p>Under the canopy of trees it was cooler than out in the sun, and Hiccup's steps slowed as he moved carefully through the underbrush. It was quiet, too; not the unnatural quiet of creatures hiding from intruders but a peaceful quiet, especially after the clamor of the castle, where the infant triplets' screeching echoed piercingly off of the stone walls. Here there was only faint stirring in the leaves above and cheerful birdsong somewhere further up the path.<p>

The beauty of the woods, with its countless shades of green, its rich loam-and-leaf scent, and its air of serenity, was lost on him, though, because he was on a mission. He bestowed on the trees surrounding him a glare that he wished she could see instead, and tried to remember what his dad had said about tracking. There were definitely signs you were supposed to look for—"broken branches and footprints and bits of cloth and unusual silence"—but he'd never been very interested when Dad had pointed them out, because no matter how many times he heard "_Focus_, son, you might need to know this someday," there had always been something more fascinating to study in the woods. Except now, apparently. Now there was nothing out of the ordinary for a stand of trees, and nothing that he was looking for.

He turned his head this way and that, peering around trunks and

trying to squash the feeling that maybe he should have paid attention to his dad. Maybe, he thought, if he shut his eyes he'd be able to hear something; so he squeezed them tight, hands unconsciously clenching at his sides as he did, and listened hard.

Nothing.

He let out a quiet sigh and wandered a few steps further. He could go backâ€”if he didn't mind conceding defeat, and in this case he did mind. He put a hand on a youngish oak to steady himself before he clambered over a fallen trunk, only to draw back the hand with a grimace when it encountered a wet smear on the bark. It left a pale brown smudge across his palm; he took a tentative sniff and was relieved to discover that it was just mud. In his experience mud was usually found on the ground, though, not at chest height on tree trunks. Hiccup took a slow, careful step back and looked up. Among the greenery a few feet above his head was a flash of red too vivid to be anything but her hair, and he laughed.

The branches shivered, and from them a disappointed disembodied voice piped, "You found me."

"You cheated," he returned promptly. He crossed his arms over his thin chest. "You weren't s'posed to leave the castle."

After a bit more shuffling in the branches a round pink face framed by carrot curls poked out. She didn't deny the accusation, but asked, "How did you do it?"

He held up his palm, feeling rather proud of himself. "You left mud on the tree when you were climbing up," he explained, leaving out the part where he'd only found it by accident. "And then," he added triumphantly, "I saw your hair."

She groaned loudly, clutching at handfuls of traitorous locks. "Stupid hair," she muttered, before shouting down at him, "You'd never have found me otherwise."

"Would so!"

"Would not!"

He bit back his retort; she would argue all afternoon if she was allowedâ€”she was that ornery, and loud besides. She'd just talk over him until she got her way. To head off any further protest he announced, "It doesn't matter now. I found you. I won." He smiled, knowing his expression was the one that inspired Gobber to roll his eyes and mutter under his breath.

It inspired Merida to scowl down at him, looking like some kind of petulant imp. After a moment she sneered, "Took you long enough, though. It wouldn't have taken me half that." From her perch she tried to imitate her mother's haughty gaze, but it didn't carry the same weight, and Hiccup found himself unperturbed by her boast.

"Half that?" he asked thoughtfully, tapping his chin for good measure.

Her answer was predictably proud. "Aye. If that long."

"Well, if that's the caseâ€¦prove it!" And with a whirl of limbs he took off running back toward the castle. Behind him he heard an indignant shout, the rustling and snaps of someone hastily descending from a tree, and a high voice beginning to count, and he laughed and ran faster.

* * *

><p>This time she'd gone further into the forest, but this time she'd had help. And even if his tracking skills hadn't improved much her trailâ€”or Angus', ratherâ€”was easy enough to follow. Hiccup passed where the horse stood investigating a shrub and gave his shoulder a familiar pat before continuing on. When he'd gone far enough that he could no longer hear Angus' chewing he paused, listening to the rhythm of the forest, listening for the break in that rhythm. Sure enough, above his head he heard quiet sniffles, quite unlike the sounds any woodland creature would make but very much like the tears of a tired, upset princess. He lowered himself to the ground and settled against the trunk of a nearby tree to wait.<p>

She'd left the castle because she wanted to be alone, yes, and because she didn't want anyone to see her cry, and he couldn't blame her for feeling that way; but it'd been hours now, and if she didn't come back soon they'd start searching for her, and the resulting uproar would strip away any calm the wood had managed to instill in her. Everyone back at the castle could wait a few more minutes if it meant that her respite would last a little longer.

When there'd been one more good, hard sniff and the labored breathing had subsided he tilted his head upward, looking among the branches for that telltale red. He caught sight of it, along with a wink of silver from the dagger at her belt, a present brought from Berk. "It might not be so bad," he said quietly, words steady despite his quick pulse.

Her voice sounded like the great fat frog her brothers had left in his bed at the beginning of his visit. "They could have asked, though, instead of just telling me I was going. At the least they could have given me a bit more warning."

"Yeah."

Since they'd arrived she'd been spending what seemed to be all of her free time with him and Toothless. They'd flown to the very edges of DunBroch territory, her leaning over his shoulder to point out her favorite haunts with one hand while the other wound through the straps of his harness, and laughing into his ear as Toothless swooped and twirled; she'd demanded to learn how to work the gears and they'd taught her, in spite of her less-than-sincere promise to only use her new knowledge in case of emergencies. He had even been able to feign indifference to her pleas for a ride at night, under the stars, had somehow managed to appear unmoved as she pouted, stuck out her plump lower lip and looked up at him through her eyelashes, though his stomach had fluttered at her expression. Eventually he'd given a gusty mock sigh and okayed the idea, flushing scarlet when she flung her arms around his neck. Night flights were special, given to contemplation, to appreciation, to invocation and evocation; but this one, under every star created, with her sitting close behind him on Toothless' back, soft and sighing against his neck, reminded him of

the first time he'd tried mead: of the steady spreading warmth, of the lightheadedness, of the mellifluous elation that had filled him. "It's wonderful," she'd whispered, and he'd nodded, lost for words and unable to trust his voice anyway.

When the ever-agreeable Highland weather kept them indoors they still ended up together. She would come upon him as he studied one of the books in the royal collection and poke fun at him until one of two things resulted: either he abandoned his reading to indulge her desire for activity, or he convinced her that she might learn something worth knowing if she paid attention, and he read aloud as she lazed nearby. Or sometimes he would wander into a room to find her playing with her brothers and get dragged into the fray, usually becoming a villain for the boys to defeat while their sister gave advice, directing their attacks against him. Other times they would walk the halls together, talking quietly about not much in particular, sharing sidelong glances and occasionally self-conscious smiles. It had been a good visit, he thought, though good didn't encompass the feeling somewhere between terror and bliss whenever she was near, the tingling he felt when she smiled.

Then at lunch today the king had mentioned that the feast in a few days would be even more festive than usual, since they would be bidding farewell not only to their Viking guests but also to the princess before she spent the winter with Clan MacGuffin. The news had surprised Hiccup; she hadn't said anything about going away, and it seemed like the kind of thing worth mentioning. He'd glanced at Merida to see her stiffen, her face paling and then flushing in rapid succession. She'd demanded answers to half a dozen questions without leaving time for anyone to respond, and when Fergus' sputtering and Elinor's placating proved unsatisfactory she'd stormed out. He'd resisted the urge to follow her right away, hoping that she'd be back soon, knowing that she needed time, and space. He'd waited as long as he could stand before going after her. He'd seen her angry before, plenty of times, even angry at him, but he'd never before seen that look of hurt, that flash of pain across her features. It was all wrong.

"How did you find me?" The face that appeared was a bit dirty and still wet with tears, though the hectic color had faded. Something calmed in his chest at the sight of her.

"I guess I'm just that smart," he said carelessly, and a thin smile appeared on her face. One shoulder jerked in accompaniment to his self-deprecating tone. "Angus wasn't in his stall, so I looked for tracks and then followed them."

"No one else would have looked for me." It sounded not accusatory, not pitiful, but amazed.

"They're about to start, that's why I came. I didn'tâ€¦" He trailed off, overcome by a strange shyness. "I didn't want anyone else to get to you first and upset you again."

She was quiet for a moment, biting a lip already gnawed raw and red. Her eyes dropped to study a leaf. "I don't want to go," she mumbled.

"I know. But it's only for the winter." She'd be spending most of her days inside no matter where she was. "Once it's spring, you'll be

back here again."

Her voice was barely audible. "But you won't be. I don't want you to leave."

"Me either," he admitted, just as quietly, heart feeling leaden. They sat in silence as the shadows started to lengthen around them; then he hauled himself to his feet and said, "We should get back."

She descended without a word and stood at the tree's base, twitching her skirt to dislodge any dust and then picking a twig from her hair. He watched her, and when she looked up, eyes full, he held out his hand and led her to where Angus waited, hesitating briefly before scrambling up behind her once she'd mounted.

Angus took his time ambling back to the castle, and Merida didn't hurry him. They entered the courtyard to see the queen there waiting, twisting her hands together in front of her. Hiccup braced himself for a scolding, but there was relief in Elinor's voice when she said, "There you are."

Merida swung down from the saddle. "Hiccup found me."

He felt Elinor's eyes on her as he dismounted, and then she said, "Darling, I am so sorry. We've been so busy with all of our guests, and I honestly thought I'd told you. I apologize. And I'll write to the MacGuffins, say that you can't make itâ€"

She drew herself up. "I'll go," she said, "as planned." Though she stopped herself from pointing it out, the wry twist of her lips was the only reminder that it wasn't a trip she'd been planning for. Elinor murmured another apology.

"Anyway," her daughter went on, "it's only for a while. Come spring I'll be home again, where I belong." She caught his eye and very nearly smiled.

* * *

><p>When he'd arrived the boys, now nearly as tall as he was, had told him that she was gone off somewhere and wished him good luck with her, and he'd nodded seriously and then broke into a smile as he made for the gate, waving to Toothless to stay and rest. The forest was as cool and tranquil as he remembered, even years later.<p>

This time she hadn't even bothered to hide: a leg dangled from a low branch, swinging back and forth idly. She sat in a shaft of light piercing the canopy; a diffuse glow surrounded her, highlighting the pale rose of her cheeks, the curve of her lips. Her eyes opened as he approached, and the suggestion of a smile appeared on her face. "You always know right where to find me."

"You haven't changed," he said with a shrug. "And it wasn't really that hard this time." He reached up and tugged lightly at the ankle hanging just overhead. It took an effort to let go, not to slide his fingers over her skin.

"I couldn't make it that much of a challenge. Not after your long, tiring journey." The smile bloomed.

"Thank you," he said solemnly. He took a few steps away, stretched his arms up, cracked his back, and then leapt, catching the branch she sat on and dangling from it. It felt good after spending so long on Toothless' back. "And how was _your_ trip?"

She'd just come back from Clan Macintosh a few days ago, and now huffed. "Oh, the journey was fine. The stay itself wasâ€|challenging."

He dropped to the ground and brushed the bark from his hands, then leaned on a nearby trunk to gaze up at her. "I see your mom's lectures on tact have finally taken."

"And a good thing, too, or else we'd have war on our hands." At his snicker she said, "It isn't funny, Hiccup! It was awful. I spent half of my time trying to avoid Lady Macintosh and the other half trying to avoid her son. Lady Macintosh thinks she has a great eye for fashion, so she was always nattering on about clothes. She even made me try on her wedding dress, and her the size and shape of a Gronckle. And Alan! He's the vainest creature alive. He thinks the only thing that matters to a woman is his opinion of her appearance. He couldn't understand why I didn't fall at his feet after he'd said a few pretty things to me. They just think of me as a, a stepping stone to greater power and glory, and yet they think I should be honored to marry into their clan," she finished bitterly.

He sobered at that, swallowing against a rough lump in his throat. Sometimes he was able to forget that marriage was even more inevitable for her than it was for him; he even forgot that they were both old enough to marry. But now, with the reminder that she'd been shuttling between the clans to give their sons the opportunity to finally win her over and become the future king, the facts were plain. He watched her for a moment where she sat, her frown not able to mar her bright, lively beauty, and regretted broaching the subject. Better not do anything else he might regret, he thought, pushing away from the tree and stepping toward her.

"Will you please come down?" he asked, voice husky. She stared at him for a moment, longer than seemed necessary to look at someone she'd known almost her whole life, and then nodded and slid smoothly forward and down, into his waiting arms.

She settled her hands more comfortably on his shoulders, and though he loosened his grip on her waist somewhat, she seemed in no great hurry to step away. The frown had already smoothed away; now a smile was taking its place, a smile he'd flown the miles to see. Anyone who thought of this woman only as a path to something greater was an idiot, because there could be nothing greater than her, no higher honor than her regard. Anyone who stayed where he was and waited for her come to him didn't deserve her.

She stepped half a pace closer. "Thank you for coming to find me."

"You know," he said thoughtfully, sweeping a lock of hair behind her ear and then threading his fingers through the mass of her curls, "we have a saying back home that I think applies to this situation."

Her head cocked in curiosity. "What's that?"

He grinned and tightened his arms around her. "Finders keepers."

Her laughter broke the silence of the forest, but it was restored again when she pulled him down for a kiss, long and deep and sweet.

End
file.